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**XXV.—The West Coast Indians in Vancouver Island. By
GILBERT MALCOLM SPROAT, Esq.**

[Read July 10th, 1866.]

THE Aborigines of Vancouver Island may be divided into three nations; one including the tribes which speak the Quoquoult or Fort Rupert language, another including the tribes which speak the Kowitchan or Thongeith, and the third those which speak the Aht language.

The Quoquoult language prevails in the north and north-east of the island, the Kowitchan in the east and south, and the Aht language in the west coast, between Pacheenah and Nespod (Woody Point). The Kowitchan and Aht languages, or dialects of them, are also spoken on the southern, or American, side of the Strait of Juan de Fuca, and I believe that the Aht language can be traced through all the tribes on the ocean coast as far south as the mouth of the Columbia river. These three supposed aboriginal nations in Vancouver Island are made up of many independent neighbouring tribes, and are almost as distinct as the different nations in Europe. They do not understand one another's language, and their national customs and institutions are in many respects very different. I select for description one set of tribes which inhabit the greater part of the outside coast of the island between Pacheenah and Nespod, and which are called by me the Aht Indians, from the circumstance of all the tribal names ending in that affix. Those people have not been separately described by any former writer, nor does it appear to be known that the different tribes are nationally connected; and, of all published accounts of a great portion of them, those of Cook's and Jewitt's appear to me the best. A general name for this set of tribes was not easily found; the only native term (Mahtmahs) for the entire population, signifying "the peoples," did not specially designate the tribes in question.

Having been placed in a favourable position during the last five years as a magistrate, and a proprietor of the settlement at Alberni in Nitinaht Sound, for observing these almost unknown savages, who, until lately, had no general intercourse with civilised foreigners, I desire to record some portion of the information which I possess respecting them, before the Aht tribes become further changed, or are removed altogether by contact with a superior race.

I would also further state, that I had peculiar opportunities

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for observing the effects of civilisation, however carefully carried out, upon the savage; and also, that at last I sufficiently gained the confidence of the Indians to obtain from them a knowledge of their religious opinions and practices—a point on which, I believe, some writers on savage life have been led into error. Their moral and intellectual characteristics have not been, as far as I can judge, to any important degree, moulded by surrounding conditions external to them as a nation—at least in modern days. If I am right in considering these social and moral feelings, religious notions, etc., as ancient national characteristics, the fact affords evidence that men can have remarkable usages, opinions, and beliefs—remarkable, whether or not peculiar or new, in savage life—such as the Aht natives on this coast exhibit, and yet be in a physical condition not much above that of brutes, without even idols, without metals, without domestic animals, and with no knowledge of agriculture; a condition, in fact, similar to the earliest and rudest state of mankind that can be conceived. Having made these general remarks, I will proceed with my more immediately personal narrative.

In August, 1860, I entered Nitinaht, or Barclay, Sound, on the outside coast of Vancouver Island, with two armed schooners, *Woodpecker* and *Meg Merrilies*, manned by about fifty men, who accompanied me for the purpose of taking possession of the district now called Alberni, from the Spanish navigator who first discovered the inlet at the head of the Sound. Having reached the entrance of this inlet, we sailed for twenty miles further up it, as up a natural canal, three quarters of a mile wide and very deep, bordered by rocky mountains which rose high on both sides, almost perpendicular from the water. The view as we advanced up this inlet from the sea was shut in behind and before us, making the prospect like that from a mountain lake.

Near a pretty point at one side of the bay, where there was a beach shaded by young trees, the summer encampment of a large tribe of natives was to be seen. Our arrival caused a stir, and we saw their flambeaux of gumsticks flickering among the trees during the night. The clattering of the cables of the ships was a noise hitherto unheard in that place, and one that might well be remembered by the people, for their land really passed into the unrelaxing English grip as our anchors sank to the bottom.

Sending for their chief in the morning, I explained to him, through an interpreter, that the tribe must move their encampment, as I had bought all the district from the Queen of England. He replied that he was willing to sell the land, so for the sake of peace we paid him what he asked, on condition that the whole village should be removed. He did not keep his engagement, and the Ahts seemed determined to attack us, but dread of our

cannon prevailed, and they did not molest us. They removed to a short distance, and two or three days after I visited the principal house with a native interpreter. "Chief," said I, on entering, "are you well? are your women in health? are your children hearty? and do your people get plenty of fish and fruits?" "Yes," answered an old man, "our families are well, our people have plenty of food, but how long this will last we know not; we see your ships, and hear things that make our hearts grow faint. They say that more King-George men will soon be here, and will take our land, our firewood, our fishing-grounds; that we shall be placed on a little spot, and shall have to do everything according to the fancies of the King-George men."

This was my first introduction to the savages. For some time their movements continued to be very threatening, and we were obliged to keep guard night and day, armed with revolvers, etc. Many rumours reached us of their purpose to attack us, but eventually Governor Douglas was good enough to send H.M. gunboat *Grappler* to our aid, and the arrival of this vessel convinced the natives that the King-George men were in earnest.

Not to detain the reader from the special subject of this paper, I will proceed to describe, as far as limited space permits, some leading features connected with these people, which, for the sake of clearness and brevity, I will arrange under different heads.

To mention first the condition of these people. These Aht tribes are undoubtedly a degraded and wretched portion of the human race, but their manners are peculiar; they have an unusual respect for their women, certain curious ideas of rank and property, and a variety of tribal and intertribal usages not commonly associated in our minds with so primitive a condition as these tribes live in. This condition, in fact, seems to be just that of the people who may be supposed to have existed immediately before the age of the stone and fir-trees; the state of life suggested, if not quite revealed to modern inquirers, by the remains discovered in the Danish shell-mounds. Space does not allow me here to enter upon the subjects of the different archæological epochs and the condition of life they are supposed to indicate; but it appears to me that the wood at command must have been very influential in determining the state of the people; a bone-using age with soft wood, probably, would be in a better condition than a stone or iron-using age with hard woods; and perhaps those savages who have been supposed to have lived in the most wretched form of human existence, were in reality in a condition quite as good as that of the Ahts.

The localities chiefly inhabited by the Aht tribes are the three large Sounds on the west coast of Vancouver Island, called Niti-naht, Klah-oh-quaht, and Nootkah; the two former of which are

native names borne by tribes at those places. In Nitinaht, or Barclay Sound as it is sometimes called, is now the large settlement and port of Alberni; Klah-oh-quaht was the scene of the destruction of the ship *Tonquin*, and massacre of her crew, as related in Irving's *Astoria*, an occurrence which to this day is spoken of among the tribes.

Of the country along the coast a short description will suffice. The whole surface, as far inland as I have penetrated, is rocky and mountainous, and is covered with thick pine forests, without any of the oak-openings that enliven the scenery near Victoria in the southern part of the island. From some of the eminences near Alberni a considerable expanse of country can be seen on a clear day, but the river, looking inland, is not varied, consisting for the most part of narrow valleys and steep hills clad in dark green weather-beaten peaks, with bare stony tops, here and there glimpses of shining lakes or rain-pools, and in the distance snow-covered mountains.

It is not easy to ascertain the exact native population of this district at the present time; but, as far as I know, there are between Pacheenah and Nespod twenty distinct tribes of the Aht nation, numbering together about 1,700 men capable of bearing arms. The largest tribe numbers 400 men; seven other tribes have between 100 and 200 each; the remaining fifteen tribes vary in number from sixty down to as few as five.

No superior position in the political scale of the tribes is assigned to any one tribe, but the Toquahts in Nitinaht or Barclay Sound are generally considered by their neighbours to have been the tribe from which the others sprung. Subdivisions of the tribes occasionally take place by the secession of restless influential individuals.

The external features of all the natives along this coast are much alike, but one acquainted with them can generally distinguish the tribes to which individuals belong. I noticed that the slaves had a meaner appearance than the freemen, and that those few small tribes inland, along lakes and rivers, who live on a mixed diet of fish and flesh, have a finer stature and bearing than the fish-eaters on the coast. Of all the tribes in Vancouver Island, the Klah-oh-quahts, who live on Klah-oh-quaht Sound, probably are as a tribe physically the finest. Individuals may be found in all the tribes who reach a height of five feet eleven inches, and a weight of a hundred and eighty pounds, without much flesh on their bodies. The extreme average height of the men of the Aht nation, ascertained by comparison of a large number, is about five feet six inches, and of the women about five feet and a quarter of an inch. Many of the men have well-shaped forms and limbs; none are corpulent, and very few are

deformed from their birth. The men as a rule are better looking than the women. The latter are by no means enticing even when young, though one meets with some good-looking women, but these in a few years lose their comeliness; they are short-limbed, and have an awkward habit of turning their toes in too much when walking. The men generally have well set, strong frames, and, if they had pluck and skill, could probably hold their own in a grapple with an Englishman. They want heart, however, for a close struggle, and seldom come up after the first knock down. The best place to strike them with the fist is on the throat or on the breast, so as to take away their wind; a blow on the head does them very little harm. Their powers of endurance generally are great. I may here mention their strange custom of altering the natural form of the head by flattening. The Ahts imagine that it improves the appearance, and also gives better health and greater strength to the infant; but they do not regard it as any sign of freedom or high birth.

I could not satisfactorily discover whether the brain is injured by the change in the form of the skull. The natives say that no harm is done; but I have observed, from whatever cause the superiority arises, that several of the tribes of the Aht nation—the Klah-oh-quahts for instance—who do not greatly flatten their heads, are superior to other tribes known to me which flatten their heads excessively. This superiority, however, may, for what I know, be in the race itself. The process is as follows: the infant is laid soon after birth in a small wooden cradle, higher at the head than the foot; a padding is placed on the forehead, and is pressed down with cords, which pass through holes on each side of the trough. These being tightened gradually, the required pressure is obtained, and after a time the front of the skull is flattened. The covering is filled with sand, and sometimes a maple mould is made to fit the forehead. It is said that the process is not painful; but some of the children whom I saw undergoing the compression seemed to breathe slowly, and their faces were pale. It is difficult to discover the origin of this singular custom.

The man's dress now is a blanket; the woman's a strip of cloth, or shift and blanket. Their complexion is unmistakeably a sort of dull brown. They frequently move their encampments for the sake of following the salmon and other fish, but they can hardly be called migratory, as they return to the same encampment again. In removing, they leave the frame-work of the houses standing, and only take down the boarding. The houses of the natives at their winter camping-grounds are large and strongly constructed. I have seen a row of houses along the bank of a stream for a third of a mile, with a varying breadth

inside the buildings of from twenty-five to forty feet, and a height of ten to twelve feet. Cedar is the wood used in making the houses. They are far from making a mean appearance. The following is their method of building. A row of round posts, a foot thick, and ten to twelve feet high, placed twenty feet apart, and slightly hollowed at the top, is driven firmly into the ground to form the frame-work of the house. The posts are connected by strong cross-pieces, over which lengthwise the roof-tree is placed; a stick, sometimes of twenty inches diameter, and eighty or ninety feet long, hewn neatly by the missel adze, and often to be seen blackened by the smoke of several generations. Some of the inside mainposts often have great faces carved on them; these are not idols, but probably rude artistic efforts undertaken without any view to symbolise the notion which the natives have of a higher being, known as Quawteaht. I could not find that the Ahts possessed for religious purposes any idols that could properly so be called.

Heavy timbers cap the sideposts of the house, and across from these to the roof-tree smaller cross-pieces are laid which support the roof. This roof is formed of broad cedar-boards, sometimes seen of five feet in width and two inches thick, overlaid so as to turn off the water. The roof is not quite flat, but has a slight pitch from the back part. The sides of the house are made of the same material as the roof, the boards overlapping and being tied together with twigs between slender upright posts fixed into the ground. The building is now complete, except that the inmates have no place for the reception of goods. To get this, a sort of duplicate building is made by driving into the ground, close to the exterior upright posts, smaller posts shorter by about two feet, from which small trees are laid across to the opposite side of the house, and then lengthwise from one to the other, at right angles to these small trees, slender posts are laid, on which the natives stow all sorts of things; onions, fern roots, mats, packages of roe, dried fish, guns, and hunting and fishing instruments. There is no ceiling, and with the exception of these poles, the interior is open to the roof. For about a foot deep inside the building the earth is hollowed out, and on the outside a strong stockade of split cedar is sometimes erected, about six feet from the walls. The houses of the Ahts are without windows, and the entrances are small, and usually at a corner of some division of the building. The chimney consists of a shifting board in the roof. There is access from division to division of the house. The inside is divided for family occupation into large squares, partitioned for four feet in height; in the middle of each square is a fire on a ring of stones, and round the sides are wooden couches raised nine inches from the ground, and covered with

six or eight soft mats for bedding. A more comfortable bed to rest upon I do not know, and the wooden pillow, nicely fitting the head of the sleeper, and covered with mats, is a good contrivance. The floor is uncovered.

The principal food of the natives is fish; whale, halibut, her-ring, salmon, anchovy, and shell-fish of various kinds. Their commonest article of food at all times is dried salmon, blubber, preparations of roe, and heads of small fish. Twenty years ago when few trading vessels visited the coast, the Ahts probably were restricted to a diet of fish, wild berries, and roots; but they now use also for food flour, potatoes, rice, and molasses. This change of food, from what I saw of its effect on the tribes with whom I lived, has proved to be very injurious to their health. Geese, ducks, and deer are also used as food, but are not so well liked as fish, and are seldom kept in stock. I give one of their methods of cooking fish—it is to cover the fire with stones, on which water is sprinkled and the fish placed; mats saturated with fresh water being thrown over all. In this way as many as fifty salmon are cooked at once, and no better mode could be desired. Water is the only drink of the natives.

As regards visitors, the Aht Indians have an etiquette by which the manner of receiving guests and visitors is laid down, and all their ceremonies on public occasions are regulated. Extreme formality prevails, and any failure in good manners is noticed. The natives of rank rival one another in politeness. Compared with the manners of English rustics or mechanics the manners of the Aht natives are somewhat dignified.

There are no traces or records of a past people on the west-coast. The only rock-carving which I ever heard of here is on a high rock on the shore of Sproat's lake near Alberni, and of this I possess a drawing; it is rudely done, and apparently not of an old date. There are half-a-dozen figures intended to represent fishes or birds—no one can say which. The natives affirm that Quaw-teah made them. The figures resemble the rude paintings which are seen on wooden boards in the native houses, or on the seal-skin buoys that are attached to the whale and halibut harpoons and lances. The Indians do not know, or they will not tell the meaning of the figures, and I daresay if the truth was known, they are nothing but feeble attempts on the part of individual artists, to imitate some visible objects which they had strongly in their mind.

I proceed now to notice the progress of the natives in art and workmanship. Many of their canoes are of the most accurate workmanship and perfect design; so much so that I have heard persons fond of such speculations say that the Indians must have acquired the art of making these beautiful vessels in some earlier

and more civilised state of existence. The native artists in their localities have in the cedar a wood very suitable for their purpose, as it is of large growth, durable, and easily worked. Savages progress so slowly in the arts, that the absence of such a wood as cedar, and the necessity of fashioning canoes with imperfect instruments from hard woods, might make a difference of many centuries in reaching a given point of skill; probably the presence of soft woods enabled very early savage tribes to live in a condition far less desolate than is frequently supposed to have been their lot.

The axe used formerly in felling the largest tree, which they did without the use of fire, was made of elk horn, and was shaped like a chisel. The natives held it as we use the chisel, and struck the handle with a stone not unlike a dumb-bell, and weighing about two pounds.

The other instruments used in canoe making were the gimlet and hand-adze, both of which, indeed, are now generally used. The hand-adze was a large mussel-shell strapped firmly to a wooden handle. In working with the hand-adze the back of the workman's hand was turned downward, and the blow struck lightly inwards towards the workman's body, whose thumb was pressed into a hollow in the handle made to receive it. The gimlet, made of bird's bone, and having a wooden handle, was not used like ours; the shaft was placed between the workman's open hands brought close together, and moved briskly backwards and forwards, as on hearing good news. The Indians on the Aht coast, if asked as to the implements they used before they learnt the use of iron, always produce old bone instruments and weapons for every purpose. Their own canoes and other work is a sufficient proof of what these bone-workers can do with soft suitable wood to work upon.

During winter many feasts take place. For a great feast a large part of the whole building is cleared, all the dividing planks that separate the families are removed, and a clear space left sometimes fifty feet wide by two hundred in length. Clean mats, or long twists of cedar fibre are laid round the inside of the lodge house. On the entrance of a guest, he is announced by name, and placed in the proper seat, where he finds a bunch of bark strips for wiping his feet. When a popular chief enters he is loudly cheered after the native fashion: that is by striking the walls with the back of the hand, or a piece of stick, in which way the natives also accompany their monotonous songs. The meat is never served till all the invited guests have arrived; meanwhile the cooking goes on in a corner of the house in a manner unknown to Soyer. Hot stones are put by means of wooden tongs into large wooden boxes, containing a small quan-

tity of water. When the water boils, the blubber of the whale, cut into pieces about an inch thick, is thrown into these boxes, and hot stones are added till the food is cooked; the chief's wives at such an entertainment preparing the food, and afterwards wait upon the guests. On everything being ready, the host directs the feast to be served up. Silence while eating is considered a mark of politeness. No knives are used. At these feasts much singing, dancing, and speech-making take place; and one custom especially prevails—distributing to the guests a variety of things, such as blankets, ornaments, etc.; all this, however, is done under the expectation that an ample return will on a future occasion be made. Of their many dances a description of one must suffice.

All the performers are naked. A man appears with his arms tied behind his back with long cords, the ends of which, like reins, are held by the natives who drive him about. The spectators sing and beat time on dishes and drums. Suddenly the chief appears armed with a knife, which he plunges into the runner's back, who springs forward, moving wildly as if in search of shelter. Another blow is given; blood flows down his back, and great excitement prevails, amidst which the civilised spectator shudders and remonstrates. The stroke is repeated and the victim staggers weakly, and falls prostrate and lifeless. Friends gather round and remove the body, which, outside the lodge, washes itself, and puts on its blanket. I never saw acting more to the life.

Many curious particulars are connected with the inter-tribal feasts, burial ceremonies, and other customs of the Ahts, but space does not allow me to enter upon them. I will only add some remarks upon their language, religious ideas, and gradual disappearance before the white man.

The Aht language, if it has any grammatical construction at all, of which there certainly seem to be some traces, is in a most imperfect and partially developed state. Case, gender, and tense are not found, and the inflection of the verbs, which is very irregularly carried out, makes no difference between singular and plural. One remarkable feature is the frequent change of termination in what is radically the same word. Mr. Anderson (see *Cook's Voyages*) mentions this as a defect of the language, as if the changes were governed by no reasonable law; but there is no doubt that these varied terminations have their proper significance, though this may often be difficult to discover. The property of the language, however, which decides its peculiar character, is the fact that it is made up of evident root sounds expressive of natural sounds and generic ideas. As it shares the two above peculiarities, viz., extensive use of root words and great variety

of termination with that most perfect language, the Greek, I must consider these usages, *per se*, as beautiful and advantageous.

An adequate acquaintance with the Indian languages in this quarter would throw a trustworthy and most interesting light on so much of their early history as consisted of their migrations. Passing from one Aht tribe to another Aht tribe on the outside coast of the island, even a cursory notice is sufficient to prove to the traveller the close similarity of the language, and therefore relationship of the people; but suddenly he comes to a sharp boundary, across which the speech of the people (phonetically at least) is almost or quite entirely changed, so much so, that even numerals and other radical forms contain no sign of similarity. This marked contrast appears about Cape Scott at the northern end of Vancouver Island, where the Aht language meets the language of the Quoquoult; and again towards the south end of the island at a point between Pacheenah and Victoria, where the Aht language comes in abrupt contact with the Kowitchan. There is a decided resemblance between the Aht language and many words of the Chiniok jargon, which is a portion of the language of the Chiniok tribe at the mouth of the River Columbia, supplemented by French, English, and perhaps Spanish words. I know about a hundred words of the Chiniok jargon, and probably five hundred of the Aht language, and among these I can recall many words in both extremely similar. The correct meaning and pronunciation of these five hundred words I have had confirmed by several of the chiefs in different parts of the coast.

No knowledge connected with this people could possess a more general interest than that of their religious ideas and practices; but the subject is one as to which a traveller might easily form erroneous opinions, owing to the practical difficulty even to one skilled in the language, of ascertaining the true nature of their superstitions. Generally speaking, it is necessary, I think, to view with suspicion any very regular account given by travellers of the religion of savages; their real religious notions cannot be separated from the vague and unformed, as well as the grotesque and bestial mythology with which they are intermixed. My observations are the result of more than four years inquiry made unremittingly under favourable circumstances, and I can say thus much of the religion of the Aht Indians; it clearly exercises an influence over them, and, within the limits of its operation, almost governs their practical affairs. They are extremely unwilling to speak of what is mysterious, or akin to the spiritual, in their ideas; not, it appears, from a sense of the sacredness of the ideas, but from a notion that evil will result from any free communication on such subjects with foreigners. Even after long acquaintance, it is only now and then, when "i' the vein," that the

sullen, suspicious natures of these people will relax, and permit them to open a corner of their minds to a foreigner who possesses their confidence. They generally begin by saying that no white man is able to understand the mysteries of which they will speak. "You know nothing about such things—only old Indians can appreciate them," is a common remark; and in nine cases out of ten so many lies and misstatements are mixed up with the account, for the purpose of mystifying the inquirer, or owing to the mental weakness of the savage on religious subjects, that little reliance can be placed upon it. The opinions expressed by some of the natives are found on examination to differ in so many points from those of others, that it is hardly possible to ascertain the prevailing opinions of any tribe; but, taking all the tribes together as a nation, I have satisfied myself as to one or two facts in connection with their religion. They undoubtedly worship the sun and moon, particularly the full moon (*hoop-path*), and the sun (*nas*) while ascending to the zenith. Like the Teutons, they regard the moon as the husband, and the sun as the wife; hence their prayers are more generally addressed to the moon as the superior deity. The moon is the highest object of their worship, and they describe the moon (I quote the words of my Indian informant) as "looking down upon the earth in answer to prayer, and as seeing everybody."

They also worship the great Quawteaht, who made all things, and who first taught the people to address the sun and moon in time of need, but he is in their estimation an inferior deity to both these luminaries. They have especial forms of worship for their different events, which I will not here enter upon.

I will conclude this paper by stating my observations on a point which, until actually placed before my eyes, I had not an adequate conception of, but which perhaps forms an important, though not sufficiently appreciated, agency in the disappearance of the savage—it is the presence of civilisation. What was the effect on the aborigines of the presence of this settlement of Alberni on the west-coast of Vancouver Island, which I named at the beginning of this paper? At first no particular effect was observable; the natives seemed, if anything, to have benefited by the change in their circumstances. They worked occasionally as labourers, and bought new blankets with their wages; and many of the Indians supplied themselves with the white men's cast-off clothes, which they took a pride in wearing. Having at the same time acquired a taste for flour, rice, potatoes, and other articles of food that were sold to them at low prices, the natives spent the first winter after the arrival of the colonists more comfortably than usual. It was only after a considerable time that symptoms of a change amongst the Indians living nearest to the

white settlement could be noticed. Not having observed the gradual process—my mind being occupied with other matters—I seemed all at once to perceive that a few, young, sharp-witted natives had become what I could only call, offensively European, and that the mass of the Indians no longer visited the settlement in their former free independent way, but lived listlessly in the villages, brooding seemingly over heavy thoughts. Their gradual shrinking from association with us, when first observed, caused a little alarm, but I found on inquiry that it did not arise from ill will. The fact was that the curiosity of the savage had been satisfied; his mind was confused, and his faculties surprised and stunned by the sight of machinery, steam-vessels, and the active labour of civilised man; he distrusted himself, his old habits and traditions, and shrank away despondent and discouraged. Always suspicious, it now became the business of his life to scrutinise the actions of the whites, and to speculate apprehensively as to their probable intentions. He began soon to disregard his old pursuits and tribal practices and ceremonies. By and bye it was noticed that more than the usual amount of sickness existed among the Indians, and particularly among the Indians who lived nearest to the white settlement, and we could not attribute the increased ill-health to any cause, unless it were to the change in diet consequent on our arrival. It certainly was not produced by whiskey, syphilis, or any of the other destructive agencies which are loosely and erroneously described as being peculiar to civilisation.

I may repeat that the increased death-rate of the Indians, even after our arrival, did not result from ill-usage nor from the excessive use of ardent spirits—as I was able almost totally to exclude intoxicating drinks—nor from debauchery, but from other causes, among the chief of which, according to my observation, I would name—the effect of a change of food, and the despondency and discouragement produced in the minds of the Indians by the presence of a superior race. What are we to make of all this? It seems that savages must disappear. Are they, in thus shrinking away, obeying a natural and general law by which the purposes of the Almighty are being carried out in their removal?

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